

Panel proposes to increase human services spending

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HELENA - While most legislative budget panels are cutting Gov. Brian Schweitzer's proposed budget, the panel on human-service spending went the opposite way Thursday.

The Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Services voted to spend several million dollars more than proposed by Schweitzer over the next two years, with most of the increases in two areas: Mental health and public money that helps pay "direct care" workers in nursing homes, group homes for the disabled and other programs.

Rep. Edith Clark, R-Sweetgrass, who chairs the panel, said its members saw the increased spending as an ounce of prevention.

Paying direct-care workers a better wage keeps them on the job and off assistance programs, and more money for the mentally ill in community-based programs helps keep people out of prison and out of the State Hospital in Warm Springs, she said. "You have to spend some money right now to prevent some problems in the future," she said. "Prevention is where it's at."

Most of the votes in the bipartisan, six-member panel were unanimous or 5-1.

Clark said her panel will take one last look at its decisions this morning before forwarding them on to the full House Appropriations Committee.

The full committee has the option of accepting or changing the subcommittee's action, as it prepares a budget bill that will be voted on by the full House next month.

Here's a look at budget decisions made by the subcommittee Thursday:

- About \$13 million more than recommended by the governor for mental health programs, including a suicide hot line, funding for drop-ins at local mental health centers, and \$7 million for the Mental Health Services Plan, which provides drugs and other services to low-income adults with severe mental illness.

- A \$10 million increase over the next two years for direct-care workers, with the intent to guarantee a minimum wage of \$8.50 an hour. The workers are employed by nursing homes, group homes and other private organizations that serve clients paid for with government money, such as Medicaid.

The \$10 million in state funds will be matched with federal funds. As many as 8,000 to 10,000 workers statewide would benefit from the increase.

- A 75 percent reduction of the proposed \$11 million increase in spending to reduce the waiting list for developmentally disabled adults, who are trying to get into government-funded programs to help them live independently.

- Increased funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program, so families with income up to 175 percent of the poverty level can be eligible. Health officials estimate that the increase will cover an additional 2,000 kids.

- Increasing the number of low-income pregnant women who qualify for coverage under Medicaid, the state-federal program that pays medical bills for the poor.

David Ewer, the governor's budget director, said he wants to take a closer look at the subcommittee's action, and that the governor may support some of the changes.

However, he said the governor will not support spending in the budget that is not "sustainable" with ongoing tax revenue in the future.

"No one is well-served if we promise today a benefit that we are unable to deliver two years from now," he said Thursday. "It's hard to be on that (panel) and not be moved by how pressing the needs are for Montanans in so many areas. But we must prioritize resources.

"It really isn't fair to Montanans to make promises that are unsustainable."

Ewer also said if lawmakers propose to finance the human-service increases by cutting other areas of the Schweitzer's budget, such as education spending, the governor is likely to object.